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Three faculty communities

By John S. Levin

Academic labor in U.S. institutions of higher education isn't unitary. Faculty work and identity differs across institutional types.

Three distinct perspectives. Three institutions. Three academic communities. This is the disparate reality of full-time academic labor in public institutions of higher education in the United States.

At a time in U.S. higher education history when there are numerous claims about the deterioration of institutional conditions for faculty, as well as threats to their professional status, we, especially faculty themselves, need to examine faculty work and identity in detail. An accurate understanding of academic labor is critical, as the claims about us can shape both policy and practice.

In contrast to one happy or unhappy family, academic labor in the U.S. is composed of several families or communities.

Although efforts to encapsulate U.S. academic labor—college and university faculty—in one aggregated understanding, such as conveyed in the recent work of education professors Jack Schuster and Martin Finkelstein, *The Academic Faculty*, the academic community of faculty is in fact a number of communities. Those communities are best conceptualized by looking at the missions and purposes of their institutional type. The exception to this conceptualization is likely those who work part-time: their labor has much in common across institutional types, with teaching as their principal activity, and research and service as nonexistent or negligible. Fulltime nontenure-

track faculty is another occupational class outside the traditional notion of academic community. For fulltime faculty, a category that often includes fulltime nontenure-track faculty, the institutional context of the three kinds of public higher education shapes their behaviors and reinforces attitudes and values. In other words, fulltime faculty conform to their institutional context and adopt the professional identity that characterizes that institution: research institutions are sustained by knowledge developers; comprehensive universities by knowledge disseminators; and community colleges by knowledge applicators.

Our recent research (my collaborators are Virginia Montero-Hernandez and Sarah Yoshikawa) addresses fulltime faculty work and identity at three distinct institutions: a research university, a comprehensive university, and a community college. Our project is unique not only in its field methods data collection from three institutional types—research university, state comprehensive university, and community college—all located in the same communities, but also in its data analysis of interview data. We used theoretical concepts drawn from sociological, anthropological, psychological, and higher education literature.

For the study, we examined the identities and practices of faculty in biology, psychology, chemistry, and sociology. We found high levels of consonance not across institutions within the categories of discipline/program, but instead within institutions. This consonance suggests that faculty community is tied to faculty labor—and labor and the discourse about this labor are aligned with the institution.

My research drew upon the Carnegie classifications. Adopted in 2005 and instituted in 2010, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching established a complex framework for the classification of institutions of higher education in the U.S. in order to represent institutional differences. Within the Basic Classification framework, drawn from the traditional classification framework of six types—Associate's Colleges, Doctorate-granting Universities, Master's Colleges and Universities, Baccalaureate Colleges, Special Focus Institutions, and Tribal Colleges—I focus upon three types: Doctorate-granting Universities, Master's Colleges and Universities, and Associate's Colleges. Within these types, I address faculty in three sub-categories: research universities (with very high research activity); master's colleges and universities (with large programs); and Associate's—public urban-serving multi-campus.

Among the public and private institutions, including for-profit, there are 283 research institutions (very high research, high research, and doctoral/research), 663 master’s institutions (large, medium and small), and 1,814 associate institutions (generally, community colleges). Faculty numbers of both fulltime and parttime faculty are surprisingly congruent: 392,500 at doctoral institutions; 239, 900 at master’s institutions; and 374, 000 at community colleges, according to the U.S. Department of Education. As a totality, college and university faculty constitute a significant labor force; however, they are not a homogeneous professional body.

THREE FACULTY

The self-characterizations of faculty work and professional identity match with the purposes and missions of the distinct institutions. At a research university, Professor of Chemistry Daniel Goldfarb (pseudonym, as are all cited faculty) denotes his professional role in 2010 as primarily research-oriented and characterizes his labor as an entrepreneurial activity. “So it’s very much like running a small business. You have to be able to do most things yourself. [T]he things I talk about, like communication, getting research grants, and all that, it’s not so different what a small businessperson would have to do. And so you have to be pretty sort of self-sufficient and independent in that way.”

Goldfarb’s characterization aligns with that of an “academic capitalist” popularized by higher education professors Sheila Slaughter and Larry L. Leslie in their 1997 book, *Academic Capitalism: Politics, Policies, and the Entrepreneurial University*, and followed by others over the past two decades with variations upon a similar theme. The understandings of academic labor in the U.S. are best known through examinations of research university faculty and emphases in national level statistics on these same faculty. The notion of a changing academic profession is underscored by details on the work of research university faculty.

Daniel Goldfarb above is a fulltime tenured professor at a public research university with a very high research profile, one of 167 such institutions of higher education in 2010 in the US. Goldfarb’s self-characterization is vastly different from Arnold Magnesium, a full-time community college chemistry instructor: “[Teaching is] what the job is all about. It’s only teaching really…We teach about 16 hours. We have about

five classes, about 16 hours with labs. Then we have office hours. Six hours or something. And then for each class we teach, and an hour preparation, grading and all that. And then we're supposed to be 10 hours available for the community…like working on a committee."

Magnesium's characterization of faculty work at the community college is consonant with that of scholars W. Norton Grubb and others, including myself, who conceive of this population as a teaching labor force. Community college faculty work requires long hours of teaching students with a range of abilities and with multiple identities and commitments, including family and work.

Amelia Langosta, a fulltime tenured biology professor at a master's institution, offers a third perspective on academic labor. She emphasizes a large teaching load, considerable work with students, committee work, which she does not enjoy, and moderate attention to research publications.

> When I chose this type of position, I…wanted to get involved with students and educate them in the science of biology and how to do research and how to be engaged in finding new knowledge, and making a difference in their life in a very altruistic sense, that I could make a difference…[S]o research…in the lab…is not for me. It is only for the students. It's an opportunity for them to experience that. To me, it means nothing anymore.…I know the reality is that for me to sustain the kind of activity that would make it in terms of publications and new grants, I don't have that energy. I don't have the inclination… I was awarded a big grant last year to train students in…research. We got like $1.4 million…And it started this year, so I have a lot of

> responsibilities keeping track of the students, and we have new courses that we need to teach.

Langosta's characterization is comparable to accounts of university faculty in popular culture and a line of discussions on faculty work, such as Ernest Boyer's 1990 publication, *Scholarship Reconsidered*, as well as conceptions of the purposes of higher education that address student education, such as Tinto's theory of student persistence and Estela Bensimon's concept of equity for all, and understandings of the public good embedded in the work of Ann Austin, William Tierney, Brian Pusser, and others.

THREE DISTINCT INSITUTIONS

At the public research university, fulltime faculty in these areas direct their energies and labor to the creation of scientific knowledge, making sense of the nature and order of the natural and social world. As expressed by another professor of chemistry in looking back on his motivation for academic work when he was a graduate student, his desired end was research and the preparation of future researchers: "Watching faculty up close and personal, and to see somebody who was on the top of their game and…the purpose of being there was to do their best research that they could and to train the next generation in the discipline…I just thought, 'Wow, how great is that?'"

These research faculty participate in an environment that emphasizes knowledge construction, research productivity, research grant seeking, competition, and prestige. Undergraduate students are viewed as diverse both in their backgrounds and in their academic performance. Hence,

graduate students constitute the prominent students in the academic lives of research university faculty. These students exhibit academic competencies that enable them to engage in research activities actively and productively. Research faculty recruit graduate students and work closely with them to promote the production of knowledge and the expansion of the scientific community through mechanisms of mentorship and career guidance. The student-faculty relationship enables the strengthening of the academic self as abstract-scientific oriented since graduate students work hand in hand with faculty members to ensure research productivity.

Meanwhile, at the public master's university, fulltime faculty in these areas direct their energies and labor to finding ways to communicate the relevance and meaning of research through their teaching. Another chemistry professor at a master's institution notes her understanding of both her personal characteristics and talents and her goals as a professor: "I'm not cut out to be a Nobel prize scientist, and so I am never going to contribute that way. But day after day, week after week, I can make a difference in individual people's lives as a chemistry teacher…I enjoy interacting with the students."

Public master's university faculty participate in an environment that emphasizes knowledge construction and teaching, as well as research and training grants. Students, who are primarily undergraduates, are viewed as diverse in their backgrounds and in their academic outcomes (i.e., degree attainment). Faculty members endeavor to maintain continual and close social interactions with undergraduate students to help them make sense of science and its limitations and possibilities for intellectual development. The

purpose of this form of relationship is to instill in the student population the interests and skills to pursue knowledge construction and application.

Community college faculty direct their energies and labor to providing academic support to nontraditional students. They participate in an environment that emphasizes academic support, student services, effective instruction, and academic remediation. Another biology professor not only characterizes the student population in her community college but also underlines her understanding of her professional role.

> I think what we do really, really well, is the nurturing. Those students that are a little bit shaky, we're on them…[I]f you've got 30 of them in a lab, you can get them and you can sort of nudge them and nag them and praise them and, you know, kick them…[W]e need to do a little pre-pre something, like pre-math or a little pre-chemistry, then we've got time to do that. So it's definitely a more intimate experience (than at the university).

Faculty work at the community college entails the development of sustained and caring relationships with a highly ethnically diverse student body in order to help students make sense of and excel within an academic culture. The interactions with nontraditional students reinforce the relational-supportive orientation of the academic self of faculty members in community colleges.

NOT A SINGULAR INSTITUTION

The implications and thus the significance of these differences are pertinent not only to understandings of academic labor but also to institutional practices. These differences characterize the nature of faculty communities

and help to place the traditional triumvirate of academic labor—research, teaching, and service—into a more coherent context. Teaching at a community college entails interpersonal relationships with students and support connected to students' backgrounds, often as nontraditional students. Teaching at a master's institution involves not only intellectual development of students within the context of their academic attributes but also stimulation for knowledge construction and application through social interactions of faculty and students. At a research university, teaching on the one hand can entail large lectures and the dissemination of information, without interpersonal interactions with undergraduates; or it can involve intensive side-by-side investigations with one or more graduate students.

These conditions, as well as other institutional behaviors, such as the tenure process and governance, as well as reward structures for faculty labor, shape and reinforce the faculty community at distinct institutional types.

Multiple faculty communities exist in U.S. higher education. To consider the profession as singular is unjustified both theoretically and practically. Mimetic tendencies across organizations—to imitate behaviors in other organizations—seem misdirected if a research university is going to model its instructional practices after a community college, or a master's university is patterning its tenure standards after a research university. Conceptually, it may be prudent to think of the academic *professions*, rather than the academic profession. This will be a useful direction when scholars advance the conceptualization of contingent academic labor and practitioners consider the reformation of governance structures for different institutions,

improvements in hiring so that particular kinds of faculty fit particular kinds of institutions, and the consideration to changes in evaluation and assessment of faculty work. Neither conceptualizations that assume a homogenous labor force nor practices that are standard across higher education institutions will suffice.

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